

Off to a flying start

The alarm goes off at 3.30 am. I have a quick shower and get dressed. At long last, after a year and half of hard work and preparation, it's time to pick up a new spotter plane, a light aircraft, to help anti-poaching operations in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park in my home country of South Africa.

Dirk Swart | Section Ranger, Manzibomvu, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park



A big thank you to **Black Rhino Wheels** for generously donating £17,142.87 by donating 5 Rand from each sale of its Black Rhino truck wheels to help rangers protect rhinos in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, South Africa. Black Rhino Wheels designs and manufactures aftermarket wheels for off-road trucks and SUVs and was inspired to help save its namesake

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First of all, I need to pick up safety pilot Noel, who is based at Light Flight near Pietermaritzburg. I feel it prudent to take an experienced person with me on my maiden flight back to our ranger base. Together, we travel to East London – the town in the Eastern Cape, rather than the hipster part of London UK – and at the airport, the aircraft's manufacturer, John Waterson, picks us up and takes us to see our new plane; the Savannah S light sport aircraft.

In the afternoon, I spend time getting used to this specific model, and practise my flying skills. Then, it's time to sign the paperwork and plan my flight back with Noel the next day. John, pleased to see that the plane will make such a difference to South Africa's rhino population, invites me to spend the evening with him and his family. As dusk falls, we hope for good weather.

Sure enough, next day the weather is clear, and Noel and I can fly back to KwaZulu-Natal. Climbing high, the flight goes very well with us chasing behind a storm front, with a nice tailwind to push us along. Our journey takes us along the Wildcoast, or Transkei area, passing stunning landscape along a rugged coastline, including the famous "Hole in the Wall"; a hole burrowed through an isolated cliff island a few hundred metres out to sea, and passing a cascading waterfall plummeting from the cliffs straight into the ocean.

After a pit stop at Port St John's and lunch at Margate, a town on Kwa-Zulu's south coast, we head inland to Cato Ride, near Pietermaritzburg, to drop Noel back home. By now, I am feeling pretty confident but, as it is getting late and we have flown for about four hours, we decide to wait until the next day, depending on the weather, for me to fly the plane solo for the first time. The next day, I attempt the last leg of my flight to Hluhluwe, with a flyover before landing. As I touch down on the airstrip, I am met by the Hluhluwe Honorary Officers, my manager and some Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife staff, shake hands, and then put the aircraft away in its own newly renovated hangar once used for the previous spotter aircraft.



ALL IMAGES DIRK STEWART

Since then, I have done a few hours of circuit work to get used to take-off and landings, practised stalls and steep turns and all the necessary skills to be able to fly safely over huge tracts of land. A few days later I put this into action: patrolling Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. Starting off with boundary fence patrols, I then monitor the corridor road that splits the Park in two.

It feels good to be able to assist the rangers on the ground from the air again. From high, we can cover more land, see more signs of illegal activity, and make sure we have the biggest geographical coverage and best intelligence possible. My aim now is to continue to gain experience with my flying, and keep supporting the team as much as possible.

Thanks

Thanks to Save the Rhino International, USFWS, the Anna Merz Rhino Trust and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, for making this possible.

Top, below: The new Savannah S light sport aircraft, shown below outside the hangar at Hluhluwe airfield, provides valuable "eyes in the sky" over the Park

